A Comment on "The Nuclear Issue in the South Pacific"

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For fifty years, from 1946 to the last French test in 1996, nuclear bombs exploded in pristine Pacific environments, in the atmosphere, underwater, and even in space, leaving behind radioactive contamination of islands, reefs, and sea, and stimulating powerful anti-nuclear sentiment in the region. Observers of the South Pacific scene should be pleased to have a French perspective on the history of this issue.

As Regnault rightly points out, France's decision to begin nuclear testing in the Pacific in the 1960s could only be met by a hostile reaction. After all, the threat of nuclear contamination from atmospheric testing and fallout had been recognized by the nuclear powers of the time, so much so that the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom agreed not to test in the atmosphere, underwater, or in space as early as 1963, leaving underground as the sole environment where testing was permitted. Yet Paris was to begin testing three years later in the very environment now considered too dangerous for human populations by Washington, Moscow, and London—the atmosphere. And that atmosphere, in terms of local fallout, was in the South Pacific. In terms of global fallout, it was in the Southern Hemisphere, and protests were indeed to come from South American as well as South Pacific countries.

The people of the South Pacific wanted to know why, if French testing was as safe as France claimed, it could not be conducted in mainland France rather than in French territories, as far away from Europe as possible. No satisfactory answer to that question ever came: If there were to be risks to human populations, the French authorities wanted those populations to be small, far away, and unable to mount effective political opposition. That is why anti-nuclear activists in the South Pacific saw the problem as colonial, a word that Regnault places in quotation marks as if

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to indicate its inappropriateness. Yet who can doubt that an independent French Polynesia, a Maohi state, would have refused to allow its islands to be used for nuclear experimentation? The great advantage of French Polynesia as a location for nuclear testing was precisely its complete political subordination to the French state, and the futility, therefore, of anti-nuclear protests of the kind that occurred in Tahiti in 1973, 1989, and 1995.

On the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ) Treaty, Regnault correctly points to the political advantages of anti-nuclearism for the Labour prime ministers of Australia and New Zealand. Both Bob Hawke and David Lange were dismantling regulated economies in ways that alienated their traditional working-class supporters, and they needed a radical foreign policy issue to enhance their left-wing credentials. And it is true, too, that the treaty was particularly designed to oppose French testing while sidestepping the issue of US nuclear-related activities in the South Pacific.

The Australian authorities showed little concern, as Regnault says, for the Aboriginal peoples whose traditional country and walking tracks lay in the test zones in Western Australia and South Australia. Here the colonial connection was more one of mindset than legal status. Australia's prime minister in the 1950s, Sir Robert Menzies, was proud to describe himself as "British to the bootheels" and to regard the British request to test nuclear weapons on the Australian continent as an honor bestowed on the Australian people. By the time another Australian government had conducted a Royal Commission of Inquiry into British testing decades later, the public mood had shifted considerably toward anti-nuclearism and Australian national independence. As for the United States, its tests created the greatest documented damage to the environment and to people in the whole history of nuclear testing in the Pacific.

On just this issue of documentation, however, Regnault has little to say. Why do we know so much about the deleterious effects of the fallout from the US Bravo test on 1 March 1954, or the secret trials conducted by the British with conventional explosives and nuclear materials in Australia in the early 1960s? The answer is that in both cases, admittedly after years of secrecy and cover-up, the authorities have been required to release previously classified information. Lawyers were taking up the case of the Enewetak people, and the possible reuse of their atoll for further military experiments, in the early 1970s, and the whole issue of compensation for the affected populations of the Marshall Islands became part of the compact negotiations between the United States and its former territory both

in the 1980s and more recently for the renewed compact of free association. The US Defense Nuclear Agency published an entire series of reports on the tests in the Marshalls, and the full extent of radioactive injuries to the exposed Marshallese has been on the public record for many years. In the British case, the inquiry by the Royal Commission produced similarly detailed information about both the impact of nuclear tests on the Aboriginal populations of desert Australia and more broadly the environmental impact on the entire continent. US and UK testing can be justly condemned in the light of what we know happened.

In France's case such information is almost entirely missing, and we are left with official assurances, repeated ad nauseam throughout thirty years of nuclear detonations, that French testing was conducted with such efficiency that serious accidents did not happen. France admitted to a few problems after François Mitterrand became president in 1981, such as the sweeping of plutonium-impregnated tar into the sea during a cyclone at Moruroa. France never conceded that its atmospheric testing contaminated islands downwind, even though the authorities constructed fallout shelters at Mangareva and elsewhere, and even though New Zealand monitoring stations detected fallout throughout the South Pacific during the "blowback events" when winds blew fallout to the west rather than to the east. "No matter how many reports are published demonstrating the absence of any leaks or pollution," Regnault says in endnote 31, "they will not shake the certainties widely shared by the South Pacific peoples. Cold reasoning and Cartesian logic have no hold over emotional positions." Yet the French state has conducted no equivalent of the open inquiries undertaken by the United States and Australia, nor is there any French equivalent of the freedom of information that now applies to the history of US nuclear testing, freedom that was expanded under the Clinton administration. Under these circumstances, "emotional positions" on the dangers of testing seem entirely reasonable and doubts about official assurances justified.

Finally, a question of tone. This rather detached analysis fails to convey the extent to which the nuclear issue in the South Pacific engaged a whole generation of activists and political leaders from the early 1970s on. From ATOM (Against Tests on Moruroa) came the movement for a Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific, which brought together the activists, trade unionists, and church members mentioned by Regnault. The achievement of that movement over a long period was to legitimize the idea of a nuclear-free Pacific, so that independent governments of the region had no alter-

native but to endorse it. The idea of a nuclear-free Pacific became part of the identity of the non-French Pacific, expressed in annual resolutions of the South Pacific Forum as more and more colonies gained independence. So strong was Pacific feeling in the early 1980s that a number of countries began to declare themselves nuclear free, and Australia—concerned that the anti-nuclearism being provoked by French testing would eventually endanger US strategic interests—intervened to direct and contain nuclear-free sentiment in ways that would protect the US position. When France resumed testing in 1995, the outburst of popular protest in Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands, including French Polynesia, was on an unprecedented scale. A simple but powerful idea had become the property of ordinary people throughout the region.